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# **Iraq and the Problematic Discourse of Defeat**

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# Iraq and the Problematic Discourse of Defeat

## Abstract

The fifth anniversary of the invasion of Iraq was the occasion for practically every commentator, apart from George W. Bush, to declare that the war in Iraq has resulted in a defeat for the West. While the consensus is clear, what is not so clear is the meaning of this discourse of defeat. One could be forgiven for thinking that, for many commentators, the declaration of the defeat of the intervening powers in Iraq was seen to be a cause, if not of celebration, then at least of a certain vicarious satisfaction. This short paper seeks to locate the meaning and importance of defeat and to explore the implicitly ethical or critical connotation behind the discourse of defeat. It concludes that defeat seems to be based less on the military, strategic, or political defeat of the US and UK than in a wider sense of loss expressed by the blurring of a critique of the Iraq war with a more general disillusionment with political engagement.

## Introduction

On the fifth anniversary of the US-led invasion of Iraq, US president George W. Bush declared that: 'The battle in Iraq is noble, it is necessary, and it is just and... will end in victory.'<sup>1</sup> His upbeat assessment was met with derision by the majority of political commentators. The liberal UK *Guardian*'s front page mirrored Bush's statement with that of a Baghdad resident stating: 'We live in a nightmare. Death and carnage are everywhere.'<sup>2</sup> This piece was followed by a two page spread of various breakdowns of the civilian and military deaths since March 2003.<sup>3</sup>

There is a common consensus that, rather than any sort of victory the war in Iraq has been lost on a multitude of levels. The spate of Iraq war-related TV and radio programmes in March 2008, commemorating 5 years after the start of the war, all reinforced the idea of defeat. But how is defeat being measured? What does defeat mean? Who or what has been defeated and by whom? Traditionally, the idea of defeat involved the resolution of a struggle between two clearly opposing sides, but in this case the concept of defeat appears to be dislocated from any clarification of positions or context of clear division.

For some radical commentators, defeat in Iraq illustrates the hubris of traditional military approaches to international security in our interdependent and globalised world. Mary Kaldor, for example, argues that, traditional military force was never going to be enough to secure victory in Iraq. For Kaldor: 'toppling the regime is not the same as occupying the country... capturing territory militarily reached its end point in the Fordist era.'<sup>4</sup> For other commentators, defeat in Iraq illustrates the need for more military forces on the ground in the 'golden hour' immediately after the end of the conflict. For Dobbins *et al* and for the ex-Bosnian viceroy Paddy Ashdown, the

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<sup>1</sup> Ian MacAskill, 'Iraq, five years on', *Guardian*, 20 March 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Ghaith Abdul-Ahad, 'Iraq, five years on', *Guardian*, 20 March 2008.

<sup>3</sup> 'Iraq: five years on: Mapping the Dead', *Guardian*, 20 March 2008.

<sup>4</sup> Mary Kaldor, *Human Security* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007), 81-2.

lesson of Iraq is that the first weeks following the invasion set the pattern for the future and that once control has been lost it is difficult to regain it.<sup>5</sup>

It seems clear that defeat has little to do with traditional military understandings of the term. The US-led forces swiftly won the war, overcoming Iraq's military forces, overthrowing the Iraqi regime and occupying the country, directly administering it and then, after June 2004, ruling through a puppet administration. On the fifth anniversary of the war, UK Foreign Secretary David Miliband stated that: 'The war itself was a remarkable victory. It went better than most people expected.' However, making even this basic point opened Miliband to widespread accusations that he was 'in denial'.<sup>6</sup> While the occupation has met with prolonged resistance from insurgent attacks, there is no clearly defined and coordinated threat to the Iraq regime and its Western backers. Also, military losses have been low compared to other major conflicts, such as the Vietnam War (nearly 60,000 US troops dead and 300,000 wounded) and the Korean War (40,000 and 100,000 respectively). Many military occupations fail to instil a governing regime beyond the capital city, the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, for example, and yet few people argued that the inability to extend governmental rule beyond Kabul constituted a 'defeat' for the Soviets in the 1980s.

Maybe 'defeat' in Iraq refers not as much to events on the ground as to the higher level of aspirations, in our age of allegedly humanitarian and human rights interventions. Certainly, if the goal of the invasion was the creation of a democratic state bringing liberal values to the Middle East, then it could be seen to have roundly failed. However, it has to be borne in mind that few commentators took this ambitious aspiration to be central to the war, which was fought primarily on the basis of the alleged threat from weapons of mass destruction and secondarily, on the basis that removing Saddam Hussein from power could be justified on the basis of human rights abuses under his reign. If Iraq is a 'defeat' because the country has not been transformed into a democratic state and regional beacon after five years then it is surprising that Bosnia and Kosovo are not widely hailed as 'defeats' considering that they are still under protectorate rule by international administrators 13 and nine years after the regimes were established by US-led military intervention. It seems strange that there seems to be a common desire to declare a 'defeat' in Iraq but much less clarity about what this defeat actually means.

For some commentators, Iraq is a 'defeat' because Osama bin Laden and many UK-based Muslims have claimed that the war in Iraq has become part of their anti-Western cause. In this scenario, defeat in Iraq has meaning because the UK has become more exposed to the terrorist threat than previously, with the statements of the 7/11 London bombers supporting the view of a direct link between Iraq and the threat to the UK. Even assuming that Iraq has given encouragement to radical nihilist terror attacks in the UK and somehow hindered the War on Terror, this could be expressed in other terms than those of 'defeat'. Would a 'victory' in Iraq have made any difference in this regard?

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<sup>5</sup> James Dobbins *et al*, *The Beginner's Guide to Nation-Building* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2007); Paddy Ashdown, *Swords and Ploughshares: Bringing Peace to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 2007).

<sup>6</sup> Colin Brown, 'Miliband calls Iraq war a success but critics say he is "in denial"', *Independent*, 21 March 2008.

It would seem that there is a dynamic generating a discourse of defeat without the terms of debate being clear. I want to suggest in this brief paper, firstly, that the consensus of defeat in Iraq has little to do with the military facts on the ground or with the consequences of the war for the Global War on Terror. Secondly, I want to suggest that there is nothing progressive in the discourse of defeat. In fact, its amorphous character has allowed the discourse of defeat to conflate opposition to the Iraq war with a more general sense of political disillusionment and disengagement. The reason for this is that what has been defeated in Iraq is the meaning of the war, this discourse of defeat is problematic because it reveals that the war has been depoliticized.

### **Defeated by who?**

Possibly one of the most hard-hitting recent presentations of ‘defeat’ was political journalist Peter Osborne’s *Dispatches* special, in which he followed David Miliband as he travelled around Iraq meeting key players attempting to rebuild the country.<sup>7</sup> According to Osborne, defeat in Iraq was both a strategic and a moral one. The moral defeat was held to be the most important: in invading Iraq, the US and the UK had proved that they were no better than Saddam. This moral equivalence was highlighted in US and UK practices, from the torture and human rights abuse of Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo to the CIA’s secret rendition flights and the massacre at Haditha. The result of these moral failings was that not only that the Western forces had failed to export democracy and human rights but that in Iraq the West had demonstrated its loss of moral purpose, undermining the international reputation of coalition states.

In this sense, ‘defeat’ is not understood in traditional military or geo-political terms but is an ethical or moral judgement. This moral judgement on Iraq is powerfully highlighted in director Paul Haggis’ film *In the Valley of Elah*, which deals with the dangers of bringing the amorality of Iraq back home to the US.<sup>8</sup> More importantly, the agency of this defeat is not so much a coherent force of political opposition or any insurgency in Iraq. Rather the ‘defeat’ is seen as somehow self inflicted. This is summed up well in the title of *Guardian* journalist Jonathan Steele’s 2008 book, *Defeat: Why They Lost Iraq*.<sup>9</sup> For critics of the war, it is the immorality of the US and UK political elites which is emphasised in the proclamations of defeat.

Often the lack of morality of political elites in the West is seen to be directly responsible for the strategic defeat on the ground. The failures on the ground and mounting body count are thereby transformed into a moral argument against the instigators of the invasion. Through highlighting secret rendition, the abuse of rights at Guantanamo or Abu Ghraib or focusing on the massacre of Haditha, the immoral actions of US and UK soldiers is seen to directly stem from the lack of morality of political and military elites. This is highlighted in director Nick Broomfield’s film *Battle for Haditha* where it is repeatedly emphasised that the coalition troops are being let down by an uncaring military and political bureaucracy and it is this sense of purposelessness and powerlessness, rather than any racial superiority or stereotypical view of Iraqis, which is seen to be behind the outbreaks of human rights abuses such

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<sup>7</sup> ‘Dispatches: Iraq – The Betrayal’, *Channel 4*, 17 March 2008.

<sup>8</sup> Paul Haggis (dir.) *In the Valley of Elah* (Blackfriar’s Bridge, 2007).

<sup>9</sup> Jonathan Steele, *Defeat: Why they Lost Iraq* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2008).

as the massacre of Iraqi civilians at Haditha.<sup>10</sup> Broomfield is clear that the target of his critique is wider than merely the Iraq war: 'I think the starting point was there were no winners, only losers and victims. This isn't just the Iraq war but any war.'<sup>11</sup>

The declarations of defeat in Iraq would appear to be less based on traditional views of defeat than statements about commentators' own sense of disillusionment which often appears to be only tangentially linked with the Iraq war itself, easily blurring into a more general disillusionment with political elites and politics in general. Without a political framework of meaning, in which to locate support or opposition to the war, the war in Iraq can become just a gruesome tally of deaths and maiming, whether of Iraqis or of coalition troops. In this respect, the implosion of Iraq becomes a free floating critique of Western power and Western politics which, in today's political context, can easily become a justification for political passivity and disengagement.

### **Radical Defeatism?**

It would therefore be a mistake to associate declarations of defeat with radical critique. Rather, the discourse of defeat seems to indicate that passive rejection is increasingly replacing engaged criticism. It seems clear that declarations of defeat are not demands for the defeat of the West: the revolutionary defeatism of those who, in a different age, would have declared a principled opposition to militarism on the basis that 'the enemy is at home'. These declarations are passive ones, posed as objective readings of the mass of facts and statistics charting the breakdown of Iraq. In fact, in declaring defeat as an existent fact there appears to be no need for political struggle. Rather than a call to arms or to struggle and engagement, the declaration of defeat is an expression of passivity.

The declaration of defeat relies on declarations about Iraq rather than political engagement with an audience. The irony is that this vicarious approach to Iraq – i.e., an approach that expects the facts on the ground to generate political meaning – is little different to the approach of the intervening governments. It is important to note that the US and UK governments were happier making declarations of principle about Iraq than actually intervening. Even when they invaded they sought to gain vicariously, hoping that the facts on the ground would generate political meaning and purpose – either in locating weapons of mass destruction or in the installation of a new government. There was little sense that the US and UK could give the war meaning through their own ideological resources. This attempt to use Iraq vicariously, as a substitute for finding political meaning through domestic political engagement, is at the heart of the appeal of declarations of defeat.

While radical critics were still developing theories of the vital meaning which the war held for neo-liberal global capital, it was US and UK elites who first expressed their unease at the idea of 'victory' in Iraq. From the beginning, the war against Iraq was portrayed as a 'liberation' rather than a traditional military exercise. It could be argued that the US and Britain were looking for a way out or at least the avoidance of

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<sup>10</sup> See also, David Chandler, 'Humanizing Haditha', *Spiked*, 18 March 2008. Available at: <http://www.spiked-online.com/index.php?site/article/4888/>

<sup>11</sup> Jason Wood, 'The search for humanity', *Guardian*, 31 January 2008. Available at: <http://film.guardian.co.uk/interview/interviewpages/0,,2249965,00.html>.

‘victory’ even as they were achieving rapid military successes. During the invasion, for example, coalition authorities outlawed the flying of American and British flags.<sup>12</sup> Troops were advised to avoid not only flag-waving but also other ‘displays of triumphalism’, at the same time Downing Street instructed the military minders of the journalists to stress that they should avoid portraying British soldiers as fighters.<sup>13</sup> Coalition officials even demanded the redesign of post-war Iraq’s new currency, after complaints that the notes looked a bit too much like the US dollar.<sup>14</sup>

It should be remembered that the US and UK governments decided against holding traditional victory parades with the end of the invasion; instead, a memorial service was held at St. Paul’s Cathedral to commemorate all the victims of the conflict. For the US and UK governments there was no real ‘victory’ to be celebrated in Iraq, and this was well before the rise of the insurgency and the revelations of Abu Ghraib. The US and UK were more interested in passive declarations of purpose through their vicarious relationship with Iraq, than with the consequences of their intervention on the ground. The intervening regimes’ lack of a direct sense of strategic purpose meant that there was already unease about ‘defeat’; international policy responses were ad hoc and inconsistent and responsibility (if not power) was rapidly shifted to the Iraqis themselves.<sup>15</sup> If defeat is understood in the context of attempts to vicariously derive meaning by going to war in Iraq, then it could be argued that the US and UK forces carried ‘defeat’ with them to Iraq.

## Conclusion

The declaration of defeat encapsulates the political vacuum in which the Iraq war took place. Without any clear political stakes in the war in Iraq, declarations of defeat substitute for political arguments in the same way as rhetorical declarations of success. Defeat in this sense reveals the victory of the lack of meaning of the Iraq war rather than the victory of political opposition to it at home or military or strategic defeat in Iraq itself. The victory of the lack of meaning should be a cause of concern rather than satisfaction, for those involved in progressive politics, because underlying this ‘defeat’ is an inability of critical commentators and activists to politicise the Iraq war. The discourse of defeat stands as an intimation of the cost yet to be paid for a failure to build a political opposition to the war.

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<sup>12</sup> Roland Watson, ‘US military officials flag up fears of triumphalism’, *The Times*, 22 March 2003. Available at: <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/iraq/article1121977.ece>. See also, Nicholas Watt, ‘Americans raise hackles by flying Stars and Stripes in Iraq’, *Guardian*, 22 March 2003. Available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2003/mar/22/iraq.nicholaswatt>.

<sup>13</sup> Philip Hammond, *Media, War and Postmodernity* (London: Routledge, 2007), 77.

<sup>14</sup> Brendan O’Neill, ‘Waging politically correct war: the inoffensive offensive’, *Christian Science Monitor*, 26 March 2003. Available at: <http://www.csmonitor.com/2003/0326/p11s02-coop.html>.

<sup>15</sup> See for example, Eric Herring and Glen Rangwala, *Iraq in Fragments: The Occupation and its Legacy* (London: Hurst & Co, 2006). This was clearly highlighted with the rapid moves to handover ‘sovereignty’ in June 2004 and the declaration that the US and UK forces were only there to assist and to train the Iraqi forces.